

## Briefings

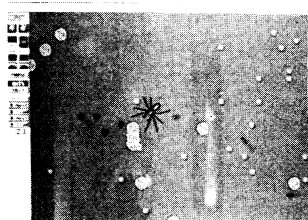
edited by CONSTANCE HOLDEN

### Brain Food in Computer Games

So you say Americans today are intellectually lazy and bored stiff by science? Don't tell the folks at Maxis Software: Non-scientists all, they are betting their corporate future on the premise that intellectual challenges—properly presented—are not only fun but profitable.

In 1989, the California-based computer game publisher zoomed past the legions of jet fighter simulators and arcade-style shoot-'em-ups and hit the top of the best-seller charts with *Sim City*, a game that lets players plan the growth of a strikingly realistic simulated city—while trying to avoid such urban pitfalls as crime, pollution, traffic congestion, and tax revolts. That was followed last year by another best-seller called *Sim Earth*, created with the advice of Gaia guru James Lovelock. In this game players are invited to guide the evolution of the biosphere on a simulated planet—while juggling such factors as continental drift rate and greenhouse warming to keep the climate in tolerable balance.

This year's offering, scheduled for release in early fall, will



*Sim Ant on screen.*

be *Sim Ant*, based largely on the work of Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson. "The goal is to give the player an electronic ant farm," says Maxis' chief designer Will Wright. "We want to teach people about the incredible complexity of ants," he says, "and that they aren't just trivial creatures." Players are invited to become members of a black ant colony, where they can dig

tunnels, tend to the queen and the larvae, scavenge for food, lay pheromone trails, flee a predatory spider, and fight off invasions by the rival red ants—not to mention cope with disasters such as a passing lawnmower or a heavy-footed kid.

While not a scientist himself, Wright finds no shortage of scientific inspiration for future games. In fact, even as he and his team are putting the finishing touches on *Sim Ant*, they have started work on their next project. Called *Bio Sim*, it will enable players to design their own creatures, put them into a simulated ecosystem with dozens or hundreds of other species, and guide the evolution of such mechanisms as symbiosis, food chains, and social groupings.

### UK OKs RU-486

RU-486—the so-called abortion pill—has been approved for use in Britain. But its manufacturer, France's Roussel-Uclaf, is keeping a tight hold on supplies to prevent a black market from developing.

The drug, called Mifegyne, will be supplied only on written request from a named hospital purchaser. The request must list the physicians who will be prescribing it, all of whom must first attend a training seminar. Furthermore, every pack will contain a track-back code enabling the company to trace it to the purchaser and prescriber. "The only thing we will not be able to find out is the name of the woman who received the drug," says Roussel spokesman Tony Eaton.

RU-486 blocks the action of progesterone and, used in combination with prostaglandins, is more than 95% effective if administered within the first 9 weeks of pregnancy. In France, the only country where the drug has been used, it has been given to 80,000 women over 3 years, with no major side-effects. The pill has been approved in China but is still not marketed.

Protests from British anti-

### Who Are the Animal Rightsers?

Researchers who have been subjected to angry letters from animal activists know that the vast majority seem to come from women. Now, a Wesleyan University psychologist has provided a further glimpse into the demography of a movement that has haunted many scientists.



*Women in the lead. At last year's demonstration in D.C.*

Claiming that until now there has been "no empirical research" to determine just who the activists are and what they believe, Scott Plous last year deployed his research team, armed with questionnaires, at an animal rights rally in Washington, D.C. The team got answers from 456 participants, 402 of whom described themselves as "animal rights activists" and 54 of whom served as a nonactivist control group. Virtually all the activists were white and 80% were female.

But the activists were by no means monolithic in their views. Although 85% opposed the use of animals in research, many did not name that as their number one priority. Indeed, nearly half named other goals, primarily the elimination of animal use for food or clothing.

Further, females and males displayed considerable differences in views. The former were substantially more critical of animal researchers, and were more approving of laboratory break-ins (which were opposed by 24% of the males but only 14% of the females).

Seventy-eight percent—versus 31% of the nonactivists—said they value human and nonhuman life equally. Nonetheless, 53% admitted to eating meat, buying leather products, or both. Concludes Plous, who published his findings in the May issue of *Psychological Science*: "It would be a mistake to portray animal rights activists as homogeneous."

abortion factions have so far been muted—an unlikely prospect in the United States if the current ban on the pill is lifted.

### SSC Fundraiser Resigns

J. Fred Bucy, former Texas Instruments chief and the man who has been heading the fundraising effort to pay for the Superconducting Super Collider (SSC) in Texas, has resigned. According to press reports, he has complained that the lack of foreign financial contributions has placed the project almost "beyond salvation."

Bucy, until 2 weeks ago chair of the Texas National Research Laboratory Commission, has

long been critical of the Department of Energy's (DOE) efforts to solicit \$1.7 billion in foreign contributions. That money is intended to supplement some \$5.6 billion in federal funds and \$1 billion from the state of Texas.

Bucy could not be reached for comment, but a commission spokesperson said Bucy's resignation was unrelated to his views of DOE. Rather, the spokesperson said, Bucy felt he could be "more influential" as a private citizen in bringing in foreign partners. Indeed, there were other signs that DOE was concerned about the possibility of adverse publicity arising from the resignation. Just days afterward, DOE announced that it had "formally invited"